

How do we Describe Aircraft Noise?

We use a number of terms to describe aircraft noise. These metrics form the basis for the majority of noise analyses conducted at most airports in the U.S.

The Decibel, dB

All sounds come from a source - a musical instrument, a voice speaking, an airplane. The energy that produces these sounds is transmitted through the air in waves, or sound pressures, which impinge on the ear, creating the sound we hear.

The decibel is a ratio that compares the sound pressure of the source (e.g., the aircraft overflight) to a reference pressure (the quietest sound we can hear). Because the range of sound pressures is very large, we use logarithms to represent the ratio in a more convenient number - the decibel (dB). Two useful rules of thumb to remember when comparing individual noise sources are: (1) most of us perceive an increase of six to ten dB to be about a doubling of loudness, and (2) changes of less than about three dB are not easily detected outside of a laboratory.

The A-Weighted Decibel, dB(A)

Frequency, or “pitch”, is an important characteristic of sound. When analyzing noise, we are interested in how much is low-, middle-, and high-frequency noise. This breakdown is important for two reasons. First, our ears are better equipped to hear mid- and high-frequencies; thus, we find mid- and high-frequency noise more annoying. Second, solutions to noise problems are different for different frequency ranges. The “A” filter approximates the sensitivity of our ear and helps us to assess the relative loudness of various sounds.

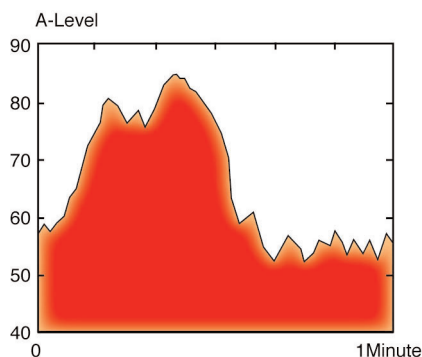


Figure 1. A-weighted Sound Levels Over Time

Maximum A-weighted Sound Level, Lmax

A-weighted sound levels vary with time. For example, the sound increases as an aircraft approaches, then falls and blends into the background as the aircraft recedes into the distance. Figure 1 illustrates this phenomenon. We often describe a particular noise “event” by its maximum sound level (Lmax). Figure 2 shows typical sound levels for some common noise sources. In fact, two events with identical Lmax may produce very different total exposures. One may be of very short duration, while the other may be much longer.

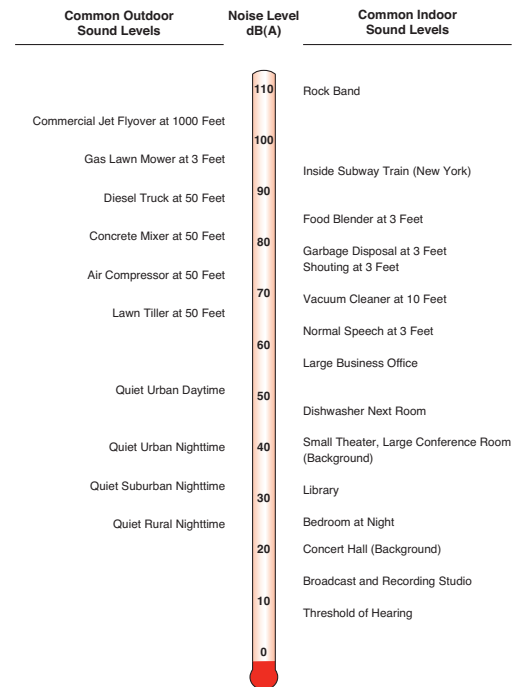


Figure 2. Common Environmental Sound Levels

Sound Exposure Level, SEL

The most common measure of cumulative noise exposure for a single aircraft flyover is the Sound Exposure Level (SEL). Mathematically, it is the sum of the sound energy over the duration of a noise event compressed into one second - one can think of it as an equivalent noise event with a one-second duration. Figure 3 shows that portion of the sound energy included in this event. Because the SEL is normalized to one second, it will almost always be larger in magnitude than the Lmax for the event. In fact, for most aircraft events, the SEL is about 7 to 12 dB higher than the Lmax. Also, the fact that it is a cumulative measure

means that a higher SEL can result from either a louder or longer event, or some combination.

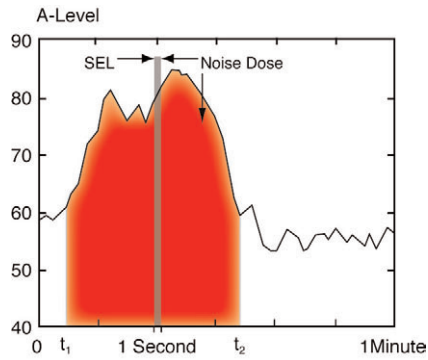


Figure 3. Sound Exposure Level

SEL provides a comprehensive way to describe noise events for use in modeling and comparing noise environments. Computer noise models base their computations on SEL values.

Day-Night Average Sound Level, DNL

The Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) represents noise as it occurs over a 24-hour period, with the assumption that noise events occurring at night (10 p.m. to 7 a.m.) are 10 dB louder than they really are. This 10 dB penalty is applied to account for greater sensitivity to nighttime noise, and the fact that events at night are often perceived to be more intrusive because nighttime ambient noise is less than daytime ambient noise.

Figure 4 depicts a hypothetical daily noise dose. The top frame repeats the one-minute noise exposure that was shown in Figure 1. The center frame includes this one-minute interval within a full hour; the shaded area represents the noise during that hour as one of 16 noise events, each producing an SEL. Finally, the bottom frame includes the one-hour interval within a full 24 hours. Here the shaded area represents the listener's noise dose over a full day.

DNL normally can be measured with standard monitoring equipment or predicted with computer models. Most aircraft noise studies utilize computer-generated estimates of DNL, determined by accounting for all of the SELs from individual events which comprise the total noise dose at a given location on the ground for a given day.

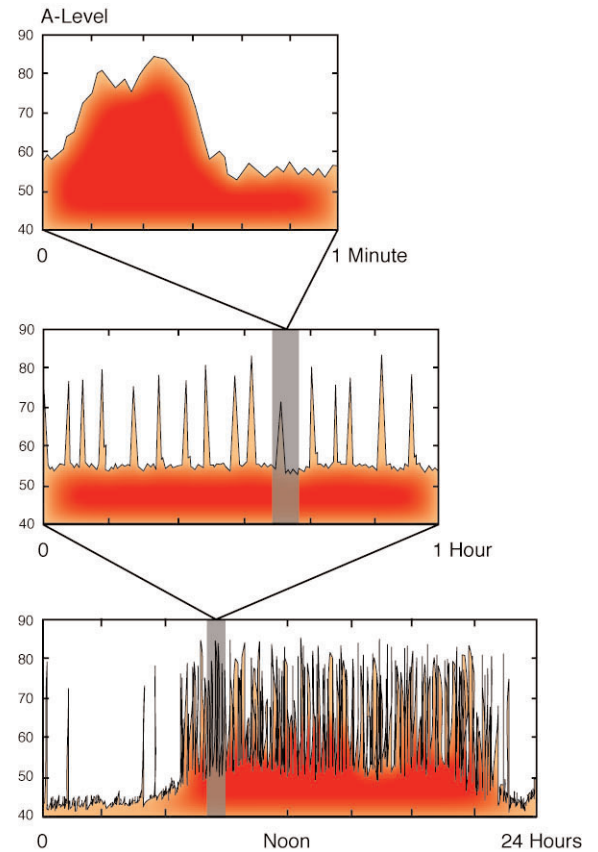


Figure 4. Daily Noise Dose

Computed values of DNL are often depicted as noise contours reflecting lines of equal exposure around an airport (much as topographic maps indicate contours of equal elevation). DNL contours usually reflect annual average operating conditions, taking into account the average number of flights each day, how often each runway is used throughout the year, and where over the surrounding communities the aircraft normally fly.



Produced by Harris Miller Miller & Hanson Inc. to support community discussions about future Renton Airport development alternatives. These discussions are collaboratively planned and hosted by the Cities of Renton and Mercer Island, WA.

